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ABSTRACT

A theory introduced by Ronald Langacker is used to analyze the English modal auxiliary verb system. The theory synthesizes generative semantics and notions from cognitive psychology, and posits a close link between form and meaning and denies the existence of autonomous syntactic and semantic components in linguistic structure. The intent of the analysis is to: (1) create a framework for making sense of apparent inconsistencies between the forms of English modals and their meanings and uses, especially the relationship between the historical present (e.g., "may") and past (e.g., "might") tenses of the auxiliaries; and (2) to illustrate how semantically based theories of language structure can be of value to teachers of English as a second language (ESL) and language teachers in general in ways that purely syntactic theories can not. Four major points emerging from the analysis that might be useful to ESL teachers are summarized, and some possible classroom presentations of the information are suggested. (MSE)

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UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH MODALS THROUGH SPACE GRAMMAR

Philip Hubbard

ABSTRACT

Teaching the system of English modals to ESL students in a coherent fashion is one of the greatest challenges a grammar or writing teacher faces. In this paper, the apparent chaotic nature of these auxiliary verbs will be shown to be much more systematic than is generally thought through an analysis within the framework of space grammar, a semantically based theory of language structure developed by Ronald Langacker (Language 54.4, 1978). The implications of the analysis for ESL grammar classes will be discussed and ways of incorporating it into classroom materials will be suggested.

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UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH MODALS THROUGH SPACE GRAMMAR

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1. Introduction

This paper really has two purposes. The first and the most immediately useful to ESL teachers is to outline a framework for making sense out of the apparent inconsistencies between the forms of English modals and their meanings and uses -- most notably the relationship in current English between the historical present and past tenses of these auxiliaries, for example *may* and *might*. The second purpose, and one which I feel has greater potential importance to our field than any specific analysis of a grammatical sub-system, is to illustrate how semantically based theories of language structure can be of value to ESL teachers and language teachers in general in ways that purely syntactic theories such as transformational grammar cannot.

The theory I will be using to analyze the modal system, space grammar, was first introduced by Ronald Langacker in the second half of the 1970's (Langacker (1978, 1979)) and is still in the process of being refined by him and others. It represents to a large degree a synthesis of generative semantics and notions from cognitive psychology. Of greatest interest to the present discussion is that it posits a very close link between form and meaning and denies the existence of autonomous syntactic and semantic components in linguistic structure.

The analysis I will be proposing is based on that of Langacker (1978), which attempts to provide the foundations for an account of the form and meaning of the entire English auxiliary. As his discussion of the modals themselves is somewhat limited, being primarily confined to the

epistemic, or "logical possibility" uses of may, might, and must, I will be building on that basic analysis to give a more comprehensive, though still incomplete, account utilizing many of the same concepts. The more technical aspects of space grammar are sufficiently abstract and complex enough for me not to attempt to explain them here. Consequently, I will be simplifying the analysis as presented in Langacker (1978) quite a bit and will be relying more on the general concepts of space grammar than their formal realization. As a result, some of the theoretical impact of space grammar will undoubtedly be lost, but since the purpose here is in taking a theory and seeing what we as ESL teachers can learn from it, I hope this simplification will not detract from the pedagogical value of the analysis.

After a brief introduction of some data and historical facts about the modals, I will present a description of relevant aspects of the space grammar framework and a summary of Langacker's analysis. I will then rather speculatively expand the analysis to cover a number of uses of the modals not discussed by Langacker. I will conclude with a summary of the aspects of the analysis I consider most important to an ESL teacher's own understanding of the modal system and a few suggestions for presenting selected aspects of the analysis to ESL students.

Since I am proposing Langacker's analysis and my expansion of it as a replacement for or at least a supplement to more traditional accounts, I will be using the description of modals in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's The Grammar Book (1983) as a point of reference for comparison. This work was chosen because it covers generally the same uses of modals that I will be discussing; it approaches the meaning of

modals in terms of their function, as I will; it attempts to be genuinely descriptive rather than prescriptive; and it was written for ESL teachers and teacher trainees and thus is aimed at the same audience my analysis is.

I will be limiting the presentation to an analysis of the more common uses of the modals may/might, can/could, will/would, shall/should, and must. Other, much rarer one-word modals such as dare or need and periphrastic modals such as ought to, had better, and so on, will not be discussed, although the analysis here, if correct, should be able to be extended to account for them as well. In discussing the meanings of modals, Langacker makes a distinction between their epistemic and root sense: following Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, I will refer to these as the 'logical possibility' and 'social interaction' uses respectively in order to keep potentially unfamiliar jargon to a minimum.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman present the following examples of the logical possibility use, where the modal indicates the degree of strength of an inference or prediction.

1) Logical possibility uses of modals (from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983, (pp. 85-86))

a. (Inference)

Wilbur: Someone's knocking.

Gertrude: That {could / might / may / should / must / will} be Sydney

b. (Prediction)

It {could / might / may / should / will} rain tomorrow.

(Where the order from top to bottom represents increasing degrees of certainty being expressed.)

For the social interaction uses of modals, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman list three areas: requesting an action or information, requesting permission, and giving advice.

2. Social interaction uses

a. (Requesting an action or information)

Will/would/can/could you help me with this math problem?

b. (Requesting permission)

Can/could/may/might I leave the room?

c. (Giving advice)

You {might / could} see a doctor

should

must

will

In both (2a) and (2b) Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman point out that the historical past tense forms are considered less abrupt and aggressive (or more polite) than the corresponding present forms. They further note an apparent difference in meaning between will/would and can/could in requests, the former pair seeming to imply a query as to the hearer's willingness and the latter pair seeming to imply a query as to the hearer's ability to fulfill the request. In (2b), they note a difference in formality with may/might vs. can/could, the use of the former being correlated with the perceived degree of formal authority of the hearer. In fact, traditional prescriptive grammars consider can/could to be inappropriate in general for requests of permission.

The modals in (2c) dealing with advice, which may be perceived as suggestions, warnings, or demands depending on context, are ordered from top to bottom in terms of increasing speaker authority or urgency of the advice. Note that their order is identical to the order of the logical possibility modals in (1a and b). I will discuss this observation further in a later section.

The only other uses of modals discussed by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman that we will be concerned with for the moment are the two senses of can presented in (3).

3. Uses of can

   a. (Ability) I can speak Indonesian.

   b. (Possibility) This business can be reorganized.

They point out that when an agentive subject as in (3a) is used, can has the meaning of ability, but when a non-agentive (or thematic) subject appears, as in (3b), the interpretation is more one of possibility.

While the discussion of the uses of modals in (1) - (3) does not represent all that Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman have to say about the subject (and they freely admit their own presentation is incomplete), it provides both a data base and a descriptive framework to refer to in the space grammar analysis. A few other aspects will be discussed later (notably conditionals, and the negation of modals).

2. The space grammar analysis of modals.

Space grammar, like other modern linguistic theories, is ultimately aimed at providing a synchronic description of a native speaker's competence. Unlike most other theories and traditional grammar, however,

it ascribes semantic values to what are often considered purely grammatical morphemes, such as the auxiliaries do and have and to some extent the modals (particularly will, the so-called future tense marker). Langacker further claims that for the elements of the auxiliary these semantic values are consistent, at least in their central uses, the current semantic values being related to the earlier, purely lexical meanings of these elements prior to their becoming grammaticized. While he does not include any explicit discussion of the meaning of modals relative to this point, Langacker does provide an example of how this type of semantic shift has operated with respect to the auxiliary have, showing how it has gone through a series of semantic shifts that have served to dilute its original meaning of active, physical control over an object.

In applying this notion to the modals, it is important to realize that they have descended from main verbs with less abstract lexical meanings, which, as we will see, are related in significant ways to their modern usage. As this will be important in parts of the discussion later on, I would like to mention the lexical meanings of the source verbs from which the modals were historically derived. The information is taken from Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1974) and the Oxford English Dictionary (1971)

4. Historical meanings of modals.

   a. can/could: know (how), understand; be able

   b. may/might: have power; have ability
      (have authority)

   c. must (past of mote): be allowed; be obliged; have to

d. shall/should: owe; be obliged

e. will/would: want, choose

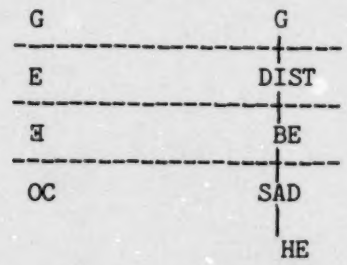
Let me turn now to the space grammar framework itself, which, as I mentioned before, I will be presenting a highly simplified version of.

Space grammar is a theory of linguistic structure that attempts to provide an integrated account of the relationship between form and meaning by relating the lexical or symbolic units that occur on the surface to the more abstract units of the semantic structure in such a way that there is a close fit between the lexical value of the individual morphemes on the surface and their corresponding individual units at the semantic level.

Space grammar recognizes four distinct levels in the structure of a finite clause. In descending order of their successive embeddings, these are: the ground level (G), the epistemic level (E), the existential level (∃), and the level of objective content (OC). A central concept of space grammar is that language is organized egocentrically and that the description of any situation, conceived or real, represents the epistemic, or cognitive, path leading from the speaker to the objective content. G thus becomes the starting point for this epistemic path by making reference to the speaker and indicating the kind of speech act involved, much as a performative does in transformational grammar; like other performatives it is usually left elliptic. E is the level of modality and "tense", relating the reality or potentiality of a situation, and its temporal setting, to the speaker at the time of the utterance. ∃ predicates the existence of the situation being described, in English through a form of do for a process and be or have for a state.

Finally, OC contains the description of the situation itself. For example, the sentence He was sad would have the space grammar structure indicated in (5)

5.



(where DIST represents the traditional past tense)

In his 1978 paper, Langacker provided an analysis of various elements of the English auxiliary, including certain modals, within the theoretical framework described above. His aim was to show that the systematicity within the auxiliary as well as most apparent violations of it stems from not properly characterizing the semantic nature of its elements.

> Subject to minor distortions of a morphological character, the units needed to explain the semantic content of AUX are precisely those which are overtly present, each having consistent semantic value (at least in the broad range of its central uses); the order in which they occur is regular and predictable, reflecting the conceptual steps involved in the EPISTEMIC PATH leading from the speaker to the objective situation being described. (Langacker 1978:86)

Our primary concern here will be the epistemic level and how through the modals it indicates the relationship between the current reality of the speaker and the objective content represented by the basic proposition in the sentence.

Before turning to the modals themselves, it will be helpful to say a few words about the status of "tense" in space grammar. Langacker argues that there is no present tense morpheme in English. In space grammar terms, something in the present is simply regarded as being conceptually immediate to the speaker's current reality (or Ground); therefore, it does not need to be overtly marked since current reality is the basic reference point already.

The past tense, on the other hand, is morphologically marked, but the morpheme (-ed in regular verbs) does not represent past time. As was mentioned earlier in this section, Langacker refers to this morpheme as DIST (distal) and states that it marks the epistemic or cognitive distance of the speaker from the objective content. It can and does mark past time when there is no intervening modal or implied condition. As such then it is actually marking distance in the speaker's reality, which logically can only be interpreted as past-time (future distance being in the realm of unreality).

Langacker only discusses the modals of logical possibility, concentrating primarily on <u>may</u>, <u>might</u>, and <u>must</u>. He prefaces his analysis by pointing out that the modals as a class specify unreality, or potentiality, of the objective content of the situation being described by the speaker. This is an important generalization which seems to be missing from most ESL grammar textbooks. He gives the following classification of logical possibility modals along a scale of probability ranging from possible to necessary.

6.

		can may	will	must
(Possible)	could might		should	(Necessary)

Langacker ignores shall and would on this scale, claiming shall exists only marginally in the active vocabulary of most speakers and that would is confined in general to hypothetical contents and hence may not belong on a probability scale at all.

The most important point here for Langacker is the presence of must at the necessity end of the scale. In acounting for its position, he offers an explanation, which accounts for an interesting observation about must, namely that it can only be used as a logical possibility modal when the predicate in the sentence is imperfective (i.e. denoting an ongoing state or condition rather than a process which can be completed). The sentences below clearly illustrate this difference.

7. a. That must be Sydney.

b. You must live in New York.

*c. John must jump.

*d. It must rain tomorrow.

While these sentences may have various interpretations, if must is seen as indicating logical possibility, only the first two containing the imperfective predicates be and live are grammatical. Langacker's explanation of this is, in part, as follows:

> "It may clarify matters to discuss epistemic distance in the following terms. G (ground) incorporates the speaker's concept of presently accepted reality. Something included in this reality is said to have an epistemic distance of zero. For situations outside

> of presently conceived reality, epistemic distance varies inversely with the degree of probability of reality as perceived by the speaker; it corresponds to the degree to which the speaker's present concept of reality would have to be modified in order for it to include the situation in question. For must, hardly any modification at all is required. The speaker, in effect, has already deduced the reality of the situation, and tentatively incorporated it into his reality concept. All that is needed is some direct confirmation of his deduction for removal of the thin epistemic veil between G and the hypothesized situation. Must therefore implies the shortest possible epistemic distance for a situation remaining in the domain of potentiality--virtual immediacy--while will, may, and might indicate longer epistemic paths." (Langacker 1978:92)

It is this aspect of "tentatively incorporating the objective content of the situation into the speaker's present conceived reality" that allows must to be used only in inferences (and with imperfective verbs) about the present and not predictions about the future.

I already mentioned that the distal morpheme with a non-modal verb normally represents distal reality or past time; when used with a modal specifying logical possibility, the distal morpheme represents more distant possibility. Thus "That might be Sydney" is perceived as a less definite inference than "That may be Sydney," and "It might rain tomorrow" is a more tentative prediction than "It may rain tomorrow." In each case, the addition of the distal predicate increases the distance along the epistemic path from the speaker to the objective content and correspondingly decreases the expressed likelihood of the situation in

relation to current reality.

Let me briefly summarize now what I see to be most relevant claims from Langacker's analysis for ESL teachers:

a) Modals as a class represent unreality or potentiality relative to the speaker's viewpoint at the moment of utterance.

b) The "past tense" morpheme is in reality a morpheme indicating epistemic or conceptual distance from the speaker to the situation portrayed in the objective content of the sentence, which can be interpreted either as past time or as lesser potentiality depending on whether reality or unreality is being described.

c) Each modal has a more or less consistent semantic value which can account for some otherwise puzzling facts about their use.

3. Extensions of Langacker's analysis.

In this section, I will propose several extensions of Langacker's analysis. These should be regarded as speculative and somewhat tentative, since I will not present the breadth of evidence on their behalf that Langacker offers in his original analysis. Furthermore, while I will be using the space grammar analysis as a base, I will also be drawing on notions from speech act theory. To the extent that this expanded analysis is internally consistent and predictive, it may prove to be a useful description for ESL teachers to use in their presentation of modal functions to students.

The first extension is aimed at filling in some gaps in Langacker's discussion of logical possibility modals and reconciling the differences

between Langacker's scale of probability and that of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman. Below, these two probability scales are presented side by side.

8. a. Langacker

could/might

can/may

will

should

must (imperfectives only)

b. Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman

could/might

may

should

must (inference only)

will

As a native speaker, my intuition sides with Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman. Comparing the sentences "They should be here at 6" and "They will be here at 6," the one with _will_ clearly expresses more certainty than the one with _should_. The problem with the relative status of _will_ and _must_ seems considerably more interesting. I believe that both of these represent, from the speaker's point of view, projected certainty about a situation. _Will_ projects that certainty in terms of possibility and generally projects into the future; _must_ projects that certainty in terms of necessity and projects into the present. It is this projected certainty, I believe, that makes _will_, when used with a first person subject, an implicit promise, as in "I will help you later this afternoon."

The only other difference between the two is Langacker's inclusion of _can_ as a modal of logical possibility. Given the existence of sentences like "Connecting these two wires can cause an explosion" and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's own footnote about the "possibility" uses of _can_ with thematic inanimate subjects, it seems that _can_ is indeed used as a modal of logical possibility.

Ignoring shall due to its rarity in modern English, there remains a puzzling question with respect to this class of modals, namely, the non-use of would as a distal form of will indicating less certain possibility. If, contrary to Langacker's own analysis but consistent with the probability scale of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman and my analysis here, will essentially represents a speaker's perceived certainty of a future event, then it is not surprising that would is not used as a modal of logical possibility. As such it would simply represent a more distant projected certainty, which seems to be no different than the projected certainty of will, since relative time is not a factor here.

The social interaction uses of the modals do not at first glance seem to fit very well into the space grammar framework. Since the whole purpose of modals and the distal predicate within this framework is to indicate epistemic distance between a speaker and the expressed objective content of an utterance, the notions of politeness and formality which surround these uses of modals seem to belong to a different realm. The choice of modals, to the extent that it is socially determined in the areas of requesting action or information, requesting permission, and offering advice appears to lie in the realm of the theory of indirect speech acts and pragmatics (Searle 1969, 1975). As a result, the social interaction uses are not entirely separate from the more neutral "logical possibility" uses as most descriptions of modals seem to imply, but in many cases seem to rely on the varying degrees of "logical possibility" expressed by modals to reflect the amount of deference or familiarity and formality or informality desired by the speaker. My claim, more specifically, is the following. The social interaction uses

of the modals follow the same general pattern as the logical possibility uses subject to the following two factors: the choice of modals for a given function depends on their basic meaning, not just their position on a scale of probabilities, and there is a principle of "social distance" related to epistemic distance which can be stated as follows:

9. Social Distance Principle

> Greater social distance (deference, politeness) is expressed by using modals which are lower on the logical probability scale, in particular those which are themselves distal forms.

In other words, it seems that the greater the social distance between the speaker and hearer, the less demanding the speaker is likely to be. The speaker uses modals which signify lesser possibility in making requests, asking permission, and offering advice because it shows less certainty of expectation on the speaker's part and makes it easier for the hearer to disagree without seeming to be uncooperative or contradicting. More explicitly, social distance refers to the distance between the speaker and a person of higher rank on the relevant social scale (age, profession, etc.), recognized as deference and the distance between the speaker and hearer in terms of familiarity, recognized as politeness.

In testing the claim in (9), let us first consider the sentences from (2a). As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman have suggested, there appears to be a "willingness" sense attached to the use of <u>will/would</u> and an "ability" sense attached to <u>can/could</u> -- an unsurprising fact given their

historical meanings. There is no question that the distal forms are more polite than their unmarked counterparts: i.e. could is more polite than can and would is more polite than will. However, there still seems to be a difference in politeness between will/can and would/could that I think is related to their logical possibility uses: my proposed scale of politeness for them in fact corresponds to their position on the scale of probability (see (8b)). I think the explanation for these is that it is far easier on the hearer to turn down a request presented in terms of his/her ability than one presented in terms of his/her willingness. Thus the correspondence in terms of politeness is basically the same as it was in terms of probability for their logical possibility uses, consistent with the generalization in (9). Interestingly, in the case of would we have an example of a modal which cannot be used, except in conditionals, with a logical possibility sense. The only explanation I have for this apparent inconsistency is that its use here, as well as that of could perhaps, is an implied conditional, as in (10).

10. Would/Could you help me (if you had time)?

The forms for requesting permission also involve a minor deviation from the generalization in (9), but one which I believe can be explained with reference to the meanings of the modals. Note that may/can and might/could are given equal status on Langacker's probability scale and that might/could are given the same level, on Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's scale. Yet, it is generally accepted that the may/might forms are considered more formal (presumably more polite) than the forms can/could. First, let me point out that the distal forms could and might are lower on both Langacker's and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's

scales of probability and are also considered more polite than their base forms, consistent with the claim in (9). The difference in formality between the forms may/might and can/could on the other hand seems to be related to their historical meanings and the significance placed on them by prescriptive grammarians. With may, the speaker is asking if he/she has the power or authority to do something, while with can he/she is asking if he/she has the ability. More traditional prescriptive grammarians have generally insisted that only the use of may is proper, presumably because someone you are asking permission of can grant you the power to do something but not the ability. The difference in formality is to a large extent simply an artifact from this prescriptive rule which quite possibly created a distinction in politeness where none had existed before. In any event, it is clear that some factor has skewed the politeness scale here so that it no longer follows directly from the probability scale for logical possibility uses. While Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman do not present the permission uses on a scale, I believe it is possible to do so, bearing in mind that there might be some speakers who habitually use only may/might (due to the prescriptive influence) and others who rarely if ever use them. The forms on a scale of social distance from most familiar to most polite seem to be as in (10).

10. Scale of politeness in requests

a. For action or information	b. For permission	
	1) Predicted	2) Apparent
will	can/may	can
can/would	could/might	could/may
could		might

The last of the social interaction uses of the modals, the offering of advice (in a general sense, including suggestions, warnings, and demands) relates very nicely to the space grammar analysis and the generalization in (9). As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman point out, there are really two factors involved in which modal on the scale is chosen here: the speaker's authority and the urgency of the message. Let us look at the latter of these two first.

The urgency of the message corresponds to the degree of logical necessity (as perceived by the speaker) for the hearer to follow the advice. In space grammar terms, this is conveyed by using modals which specify lesser epistemic distance for those outcomes which the speaker perceives as being most necessary (e.g. by using must or will, and to a lesser degree should) and greater epistemic distance for those outcomes which the speaker is less certain about the necessity of (e.g. might or could). Thus, assuming the social distance between the speaker and hearer is minimal, the scale for the example in (2c) represents increasing degrees of perceived logical necessity by the speaker, and the modals indicate in some sense implicit predictions analogous to those of the logical possibility senses of these modals.

Note that Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman do not specify can and may as possible modals for giving advice. Since a sentence like "You can paint this room blue to go with your furniture" can be construed as advice, it seems clear that can is used with this function. The absence of may here is considerably more puzzling -- I have no explanation for this gap.

Social distance seems to play the following role in the giving of

advice. The greater the social distance between the speaker and hearer, the more likely the speaker is to use the forms which specify greater epistemic distance and hence lesser logical necessity, the reason being that it is potentially demeaning to someone of perceived higher authority to be told by a subordinate that an action of his or hers is logically necessary, even if the speaker believes it to be so. Use of the forms might and could in particular state the speaker's uncertainty about the advice being given and consequently are perceived as being more polite or deferential by the hearer, since they allow him/her to ignore the advice without acting contrary to an expressed logical necessity.

There are several remaining uses of modals I will not have space to say much about; in particular the behavior of modals under negation and their use in hypothetical and contrary to fact conditionals. However, I will make a few brief statements about how these might fit into the framework presented.

As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman point out, when the logical possibility modals can and could are negated their position on the probability scale shifts and they come to represent 100% (or near) impossibility, e.g. That can't/couldn't be Sydney. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman treat this as unusual; however, given the basic semantic sense of can as "able," this feature is much less puzzling, since "not able" would imply impossibility. What is much more interesting is the fact that may and might do not shift their positions on the scale under negation. Cook (1978), working in a generative semantic framework accounts for this by hypothesizing a different scope of negation for the two pairs, with can/could inside the scope of the negative and may/might

outside of it, which implies some interesting syntactic differences among the modals beyond those discussed here.

With respect to the modals' use in conditionals, the following basic pattern seems to emerge. Contrary to fact conditionals always occur with both the modal and the verb in the conditional clause in the distal form: e.g. If I had a dollar, I would give it to you. This is not surprising, since we have already seen that the "past tense" sense of the distal predicate is confined to reality, and that otherwise it expresses unreality. In fact, Langacker's characterization of the distal predicate would seem to account in general for the use of the English "past tense" as the marker of subjunctive.

Hypothetical conditionals, on the other hand, have two basic forms: one in which the modal and verb in the conditional clause are both in the present (or unmarked) and one in which they both take distal forms: e.g. If we ask him, he will help us/If we asked him, he would help us. The use of the distal forms here seems to parallel their use in the area of offering advice. That is, if there is some perceived uncertainty about the advisability of the action or if there is sufficient perceived social distance between the speaker and hearer, then the distal forms will be used.

Recall that earlier in this section, I suggested that if will represented a speaker's projected certainty of a future event then would, its distal form, would represent more distant projected certainty, a distinction that makes little semantic sense, hence the absence of would from the scale of probability in (8). However, since conditional projected certainty logically reflects a lower absolute probability than

non-conditional projected certainty, the use of would in conditionals seems entirely expected and consistent with the combined meanings of will and the distal morpheme.

4. Applying the space grammar analysis

There are two ways I feel the preceding analysis of modals, could be of use to ESL teachers. The first is by increasing their own knowledge of the systenaticity among the various uses of the modals; the second, through using selected parts of the analysis to help their students master the intricacies of the modal system.

From Langacker's analysis and my own extensions of it, four general points emerge which I feel ESL teachers should be aware of. These are summarized below.

11. Summary of major points

a. Modals as a class represent unreality or potentiality relative to the speaker's reality at the moment of the utterance.

b. Modals do not simply represent varying degrees of unreality or potentiality: their range of uses is in many cases consistent with their historical meanings, allowing for reasonable metaphorical variations.

c. The "past tense" morpheme actually indicates cognitive distance from the speaker's present view of reality. When confined to reality, it indicates distance in time (the past); when attached to a modal, it indicates more distant possibility than the base form of the modal.

d. Social interaction uses of modals are related to logical possibility uses in the following way: the greater the perceived social distance between the speaker and hearer, the more likely a speaker will choose a form lower on the probability scale, particularly a distal form.

As to the extent to which a teacher should make use of this analysis in presenting the modals to students, that will depend to a large degree on the methodologies being employed and the level of the students. I have no specific recommendations beyond the observation that students appear to thrive on generalizations of any kind that might help them make sense out of a complex construction. There are few things more frustrating to them than having to face the typical textbook which describes the modals one by one and gives lists of uses for each with no attempt to capture the systematicity that exists among these uses and among the forms of the modals themselves.

In my own presentation of modals to ESL classes, I begin by discussing the historical meanings of the modals as presented in (4). I then point out that the purpose of all modals is to indicate potentiality, so that most of the time they represent a kind of future orientation. I discuss a single modal, usually can/could, and show how the various uses relate to each other and to the original meaning. I bring up the idea of the "distal" marker at this time and show the students show they can conceive of it as marking distance in any of three dimensions: time (past tense), possibility (more distant possibility), and social relationships (greater social distance, due to a difference in rank or unfamiliarity) Even a brief explanation of these concepts seems

to generate a lot of student interest, as well as a lot of questions. I believe it can be a very effective review technique for advanced students as well as a supplement to more traditional coverage for intermediate students.

At the beginning of this paper, I stated that it had two goals: to help ESL teachers make sense out of the apparent inconsistencies in the modal system and to illustrate the value of semantically based theories of language structure. If I have been successful at all in reaching the first goal, it is due to the strength of semantically based theories of language structure, such as space grammar. There are a number of other domains in English grammar where form and function seem related that could benefit from an analysis such as the one Langacker proposed for the auxiliary--the preposition system, the article system, and the system of verb complementation for example. At least one other aspect of English grammar -- the verb-particle construction -- has already been analyzed using the space grammar framework for ESL teachers (Burnham and Linder, 1983). The lesson to be learned here by ESL teachers is that there are other approaches to language structure besides transformational grammar, and that the fact that a theory is not recognized as being a dominant one in theoretical linguistics, doesn't mean that it is either misguided or of no value to ESL teachers. On the contrary, it seems we might be able to discover quite a lot by looking into such theories with an eye on practical application.

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